

Ascension of Our Lord
Russian orthodox Church
Karluk
Kodiak Island
Alaska

HABS No. AK-77

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ASCENSION OF OUR LORD RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

HABS No. AK-77

Location: Karluk, Kodiak Island, Alaska.

Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: Ascension of Our Lord Russian Orthodox Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: The oldest Russian Orthodox church still in use in Alaska, the church at Karluk also exhibits an unusual architectural sophistication, with its pedimented Greek Revival doorway and distinctive belfry. Traditional elements of Alaskan Russian Orthodox churches -- such as the division of space, the axial alignment, and the octagonal cupola -- are also found in this pristine church, built by a cannery in 1888 for its Native workers.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1888. A stenciled plaque inside the church reads: "MELETY'S MEMORIAL CHURCH/BUILT IN JUNE 11, 1888/BY CHARLIE SMITH HURSH/KARLUK ALASKA."
2. Architect, builder: The builder was Charlie Smith Hursh, but it is not known if he was the designer as well. A government report identified "Smith and Hirsch" as the owners of the cannery at Karluk in 1889. They undertook a program to replace Natives' dwellings with new houses. Melety, a Native, requested that a church be built for him instead.
3. Original plans and construction: Photographs taken the year after construction (see III.A. below) show the church very much as it is today. A gable-roofed nave, crowned by an octagonal cupola, is framed by a lower, gable-roofed sanctuary on the east end, and a two-story narthex with belfry tower on the west end.

Smith and Hirsch built the first cannery on Kodiak Island here in 1882. The Karluk River was incredibly rich in salmon; more were taken here than anywhere else in Alaska.¹ By 1889 there were five canneries operating here. Smith and Hirsch's operation was renamed the Karluk Packing Company in 1884, and packed a record 101,304 cases in 1888 (its annual average was closer to 50,000). At first, the cannery employed ten Chinese for the canning, and two gangs of Native

¹Jefferson F. Moser, The Salmon and Salmon Fisheries of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1899), 144.

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fishermen, five or six men in each.² In 1896, operating in conjunction with another cannery, the Karluk Packing Company employed 200 whites, 200 Chinese, and 100 Natives.³ As temporary housing was provided for the whites and Chinese, it was not unusual for canneries to provide housing for the Natives as well. The construction of a church could have been part of this effort, but it does not explain the sophistication of the design and the obvious care that went into its construction.

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

An 1889 photograph (see III.A. below) shows the previous church, located about 10 yards south of the new one. It was built before 1878, as it was named in an inventory conducted that year.⁴ A low, hip-roofed structure, it had a low gable-roofed vestibule on the west and a low, hip-roofed sanctuary on the east. It appears to be covered with horizontal planks.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The rectangular, gable-roofed church features a Greek Revival architrave and a belfry with round arches. The roof on the belfry is more reminiscent of a Roman dome than an onion dome, but the octagonal cupola over the nave and the division of the building into exterior elements of sanctuary, nave, and tower are common to Alaskan Russian Orthodox churches.
2. Condition of fabric: good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The nave is 26'-7" x 37'-11", with a 12'-7" x 11'-8" tower on the front and a 16'-5" x 14'-1" sanctuary on the rear.
2. Foundations: wood post.
3. Walls: The walls are clapboards, painted white. The trim is painted light blue, while the foundation and roof are painted lime green.

²Moser, 148.

³Moser, 150.

⁴Alaskan Russian Church Archives, reel 151.

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4. Structural system: wood frame.
5. Stoop: There is a board stoop and boardwalk.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The double doors are set in a shouldered architrave with a Latin cross in the triangular lintel. This doorway is set in a larger architrave, with pilasters supporting a molded pediment.
 - b. Windows: Windows with six-over-six-light sash are set in surrounds similar to the door. The belltower has bull's-eye windows on three sides. The window on the east end of the sanctuary has been painted out.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The gable roofs of the nave and sanctuary are covered with corrugated metal.
 - b. Belltower: There is a two-story belltower with belfry on top. The belfry, mounted on the pyramidal roof of the tower, has round-arched, pilastered openings. The belfry's bell-cast roof is topped by a three-bay cross. The sides of the belfry, originally open, have horizontal slats.
 - c. Cupola: The octagonal cupola over the nave has six-over-six-light windows on two sides, and a polygonal roof covered with wood shingles.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The nave is one open space. The vestibule occupies the first floor of the belltower. The sanctuary is behind the iconostas, on the east end of the building.
2. Stairway: There is a two-step amvon, with a semi-circular projection in the center, and krilos on both sides.
3. Flooring: The flooring is covered with linoleum and scattered carpets.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The wainscot of vertical beveled boards is painted a bright green. The walls are 3"-wide vertical beaded boards, painted white. The ceiling is painted light blue.
5. Doorways: The double doors between the nave and the vestibule have two panels each.

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6. Decorative features: The iconostas, divided into nine bays, has a paneled wainscot, like the walls; a space for the icons; and a space above the main icons for smaller, squarish ones. Four icons on the side walls were probably originally located on the iconostas, as the icons now on the iconostas appear to be newer.

The nave ceiling opens up to an octagonal dome with curved sides, which in turn opens up to a straight-sided cupola, with two windows and a flat ceiling. From it hangs a crystal chandelier with etched-glass globes.

7. Bells: A bell on the front porch is engraved "W. T. GARRATT & CO. S.F. CAL 1894. With the blessing of his eminence Rt. Rev. Nicholas, Bishop of Alaska and Aleutian Islands, this bell was cast for the Russian Orthodox Chapel of the Ascension at Karluk, Alaska, A.D. 1894, August 22nd."

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church sits on a bluff above the mouth of the Karluk River. The village today is about three-quarters of a mile up the river, at the opposite end of the airstrip. The building faces west, with the altar on the east end, as is traditional among Russian Orthodox churches.
2. Historic landscape design: In 1889, there were five canneries operating below the bluff, at the mouth of the Karluk River. The "New Village" was clustered around the church, while "Old Karluk Village" was located on the opposite shore of the river. The canneries closed in the 1930s, and a storm in 1978 realigned the river mouth.
3. Outbuildings: There is a small, corrugated-metal storage shed to the northwest of the church.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

Bean, 1889. Includes a distant view of the Native village, with the church (plate IX); a view of the rear of the church, with a barabara in the foreground (plate X); a photograph of the canneries and seining operations (frontispiece); and a map showing old and new churches, barabaras in the villages, and canneries (plate XXXVI).

Moser, 1898. Includes a photograph of a general view of the Karluk canneries, showing the church (plate 53).

The National Archives possesses other photographs taken by Bean, including one showing the new and old church side by side, taken in 1889, 22-FA-1152. This same photograph is

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reproduced in Fern A. Wallace, The Flame of the Candle (Chilliwack, B.C.: SS. Kyril and Methody Society, 1974), plate 29.

B. Bibliography:

Alaskan Russian Church Archives, reel 151, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Bean, Tarleton H., U.S. Fish Commission. Report on the Salmon and Salmon Rivers of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1890.

Moser, Jefferson F., U.S. Commission on Fish and Fisheries. The Salmon and Salmon Fisheries of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1899.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of Ascension of Our Lord Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska, and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during summer 1990 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jet Lowe, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO
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